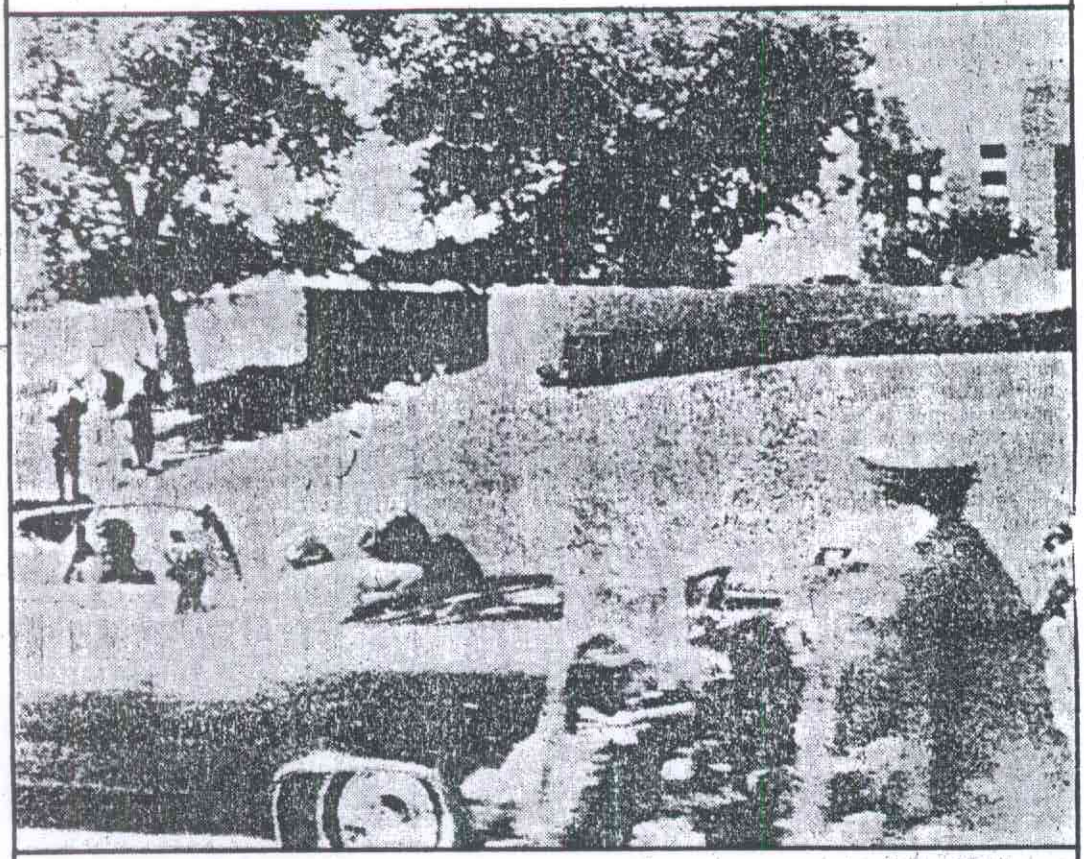
JFK Death Files



A newsreel photo of the moment after Kennedy was shot in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963

S.F. CHRONICLE
12/8/77 p. 1

Assassination Probe

FBI Secrets Revealed

Washington

J. Edgar Hoover questioned whether Lee Harvey Oswald alone assassinated John F. Kennedy, and ordered his agents to check vague, tantalizing evidence of a Cuban conspiracy, FBI documents disclosed yesterday.

But the Cuban leads apparently proved uncheckable, and there seemed to be nothing else in the 40,000 pages of FBI documents released yesterday that would invalidate the Warren Commission's main findings.

Namely, that Oswald — whom Hoover called a pro-Castro "nut" — acted alone in killing Kennedy in Dallas Nov. 22, 1963, and that Jack Ruby acted alone in killing Oswald two days later.

The bureau, under pressure of a freedom of

Page 6, Col. 1

From Page 1

information suit, released half of its long-guarded, moderately censored Kennedy assassination files in a flood yesterday morning. It plans to release another 40,000-plus pages in January.

Initial scrutiny of the voluminous first batch — a half-ton stack of 25,000 unedited memos and raw investigative reports, including rumors and false leads — suggested that Hoover ordered an immediate, all-out FBI effort to identify Kennedy's killer and follow all conspiracy leads.

It also showed that the director was very sensitive to innuendo that the FBI had been derelict in not recognizing Oswald as a potential assassin, and issued handwritten orders to muzzle an agent — James Hosty of the Dallas bureau — who had been quoted as saying the bureau knew beforehand that Oswald was capable of killing the President.

"Tell Dallas to tell Hosty to keep his mouth shut," Hoover scrawled at the bottom of an interoffice memo dated April 24, 1964. "He has already done irreparable harm."

And, in a letter written Dec. 10, 1963, to a sympathetic private citizen, Hoover stated that, even though agents had held Oswald under surveillance since he returned from life as a defector in Russia, "we had no information indicating that Lee Harvey Oswald was a possible assassin."

The main points disclosed by the files released yesterday are:

• Hoover advised fledgling President Lyndon Johnson within hours of Kennedy's death that he believed Oswald, who was arrested quickly, "probably" fired the fatal shots.

• Although Hoover never had any doubts Oswald was the lone triggerman, the FBI leader and Secret Service chief James Rowley both saw possibilities of a conspiracy from the outset.

• Hoover's own suspicions focused quickly on possibilities of a Castro Cuban plot because the FBI had obtained letters purportedly written to Oswald from an unidentified person in Cuba, praising his abilities as a sharpshooter and apparently urging him to kill Kennedy to please the Cuban's "chief."

• Hoover confided in Johnson about these letters — apparently never authenticated, and never given the Warren Commission — 20 days after Kennedy's killing. He persuaded Johnson to quash a Justice Department proposal that the government tentatively identify Oswald as the lone assassin, without conspirators, and Ruby as Oswald's lone killer.

• Voluminous supporting FBI documents make clear, however, that agents concluded after investigating hundreds of tips that Oswald did act alone in killing Kennedy, even though he "frantically" denied any involvment, according to one memo.

• Similar documentation also makes clear the bureau concluded that Ruby, by himself, shot Oswald. Agents quoted him as saying he did the deed "in a moment of insanity." There was considerable fretting, but no real explanation, over how Ruby managed to walk right up to Oswald in the basement of the Dallas Police Department.

• The FBI documents occasionally mention CIA participation in the probe, but include no samples of CIA assistance.

Indication of Hoover's conspiracy suspicions occurs at more than one point in the material — including a memo written hours after the slaying — but is most clearly stated in a staff memorandum he wrote Dec. 12, 1963.

In it, he described a meeting he had had with Johnson concerning a Justice Department proposal that an interim statement be issued identifying Oswald as the lone assassin, without "foreign or subversive" support and with no links to Ruby.

"I flatly disagreed," Hoover wrote, with the proposal to give those conclusions official government approval so quickly.

He said Johnson sided with him.

"I said I personally believe Oswald was the assassin," Hoover wrote, but added: "The second aspect as to whether he was the only man gives me great concern."

He said he confided to Johnson "that we have letters, not in the (early FBI) report because we were not able to prove it, written to him from Cuba referring to the job he was going to do, his good marksmanship, and stating when it was all over he would be brought back to Cuba and presented to the chief."

But he said he further advised Johnson, "that we do not know if 'the chief' was (Fidel) Castro and cannot make an investigation because we have no intelligence operation in Cuba; that I did not put this in the report because we did not have proof of it and did not want to put speculation in the report."

In conclusion, he said, "I urged strongly that we not reach conclusion Oswald was the only man."

Early examination of the files did not indicate whether the bureau was ever able to develop more information on these letters, or what Hoover may have told the Warren Commission about them before that presidential body published its own voluminous report — naming Oswald the lone assassin — nearly a year later.

(The Warren Commission was created by Johnson to investigate Kennedy's death. It was led by then Chief Justice Earl Warren and its seven members included future President Gerald Ford.)

Some conspiracy theorists have argued that Castro had Kennedy killed in retaliation for CIA plots against the Cuban leader's own life. Other theories accuse anti-Castro Cubans, other rightwing forces, the Soviets, the South Vietnamese, the CIA and the FBI itself as the conspirators.

Addressing lingering questions over whether the CIA had cooperated fully in the investigation, Hoover noted in a memo written four days after the killing that CIA director John McCone had called "to be sure I am satisfied the CIA is giving all the help they possibly can . . .

"I assured Mr. McCone we had the very best support we could possibly expect from the CIA."

Years later, however, congressional investigation showed that the CIA never told the Warren Commission there had been U.S.-backed plots against Castro's life.

The documents released yesterday seemed to offer no particular supporting evidence for conspiracy theories.

But they do show that Hoover and Rowley, the Secret Service chief of that day, began thinking conspiracy immediately.

In a staff memorandum he timed off one hour and 51 minutes after the 12:30 p.m. Kennedy shooting, Hoover summed up a telephone conversation in which he and Rowley discussed conspirators ranging from the Cubans to the Ku Klux Klan.

"Mr. Rowley stated he was also thinking of subversive elements — Mexico, Cuba," Hoover wrote. "I then mentioned the Klan element."

Nonetheless, Hoover never apparently entertained any doubts that Oswald had pulled the trigger — regardless of who may have put him up to it.

United Press

SFC
12/8/77
P. 6

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